ROLLING BOULDERS UPHILL: RETHINKING REENTRY WAGE AND POLICY BARRIERS WILL BENEFIT CONNECTICUT’S COMMUNITIES AND ECONOMY

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Connecticut’s employment recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic economic shutdown in 2020 lags behind the average recovery rate of the United States as a whole, and as of April 2023, Connecticut has an average of 1.4 jobs available for every unemployed person in the state, meaning that Connecticut does not have enough workers in the labor market to meet the needs of employers. In tight labor markets, states can increase the number of workers by reducing barriers to work for groups disproportionately locked out of the labor market. People who have experienced criminal legal system involvement are one of these groups with high disengagement from the labor market and high rates of unemployment. Mindful engagement of those with criminal legal system involvement can ease labor market pressures and amplify economic recovery by increasing the labor force participation rate. It could also ease some strain on the State budget by increasing the taxpayer base and decreasing need for public assistance.

However, when individuals with legal system involvement reenter their communities, they face multiple barriers to entering the workforce, called collateral consequences. Policies that create collateral consequences exist at multiple levels of government. Systemic discrimination within the community may also result in collateral consequences. Policies and discrimination can impact returning residents’ access to housing, public assistance programs, professional licensure, and employment. These consequences can have a large economic impact not just for reentering individuals; by making it harder for reentering individuals to meet their basic needs, collateral consequences have a detrimental impact on society as a whole.

In addition to economic benefits, engaging people with criminal legal system involvement in stable, meaningful employment with sustainable pay is a research-supported method to help people out of the cycle of crime and make communities safer. While working to support their basic needs and legal obligations, people reentering their communities also need time to attend to their mental and physical health and build strong connections with family and community; these are all critical aspects of reducing a person’s likelihood of committing a future crime.

Policies and programs to engage people with criminal legal system involvement with the labor market must target the demographics, educational levels, and previous work experience of people reentering their communities. Over half of Connecticut’s reentry population are parents of dependent children, over three-quarters have not attended college, and over 30 percent have less than two years of employment experience or vocational training.

This research report seeks to help policymakers and reentry experts make decisions regarding reentry programs and policies. We compare information about Connecticut’s workforce needs within occupations appropriate for the education and experience level of most people who are reentering, examining the sustainability of the entry wages of these occupations, and analyzing federal and state policies that may create barriers to entering these occupations. To provide further context to the analysis, the research includes qualitative information from Connecticut Justice Alliance Justice Advisors, formerly incarcerated young people who are now part of Connecticut’s workforce.
In order to examine large patterns that apply to Connecticut occupations and policy barriers, we operationalize our data in the following ways:

- Our labor data is from the first quarter of 2022.
- We use annual openings and projected growth to measure workforce needs.
- We include occupations that do not require a bachelor’s degree and less than five years of prior experience; this is a total of 326 occupations and spans all Bureau of Labor occupational groups except Management.
- We define sustainable entry-level wages as those that earn 60 percent of the State Median Income (SMI) for full-time workers. Most of Connecticut’s public assistance programs require families to earn this amount or less to qualify.
- We break policy barriers into two categories: high and low/no.
- We define low policy barriers as those applied discretionally at the licensing level and statutes that impact a narrow category of people.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Overwhelmingly, we find that Connecticut’s unfair wage distribution and high cost of living contribute to reentering individuals having few options that pay high enough entry-level wages to support themselves much less children. Occupations that have higher entry-level pay also have higher educational and policy barriers. Few policies unilaterally excluded people with any form of criminal legal system involvement from participating in an occupation, but many occupations have a complex web of policy restrictions that individuals reentering their communities must navigate if they are interested in particular fields of work.

Reentering people with greater financial needs have fewer choices in occupations that can meet those needs. Here is the breakdown of occupations by entry-level wages:

- Can support an adult and two children: 13 occupations (4%)
- Can support an adult and one child: 25 occupations (8%)
- Can support an adult: 76 occupations (23%)
- Cannot support an adult: 211 occupations (65%)
Occupations with higher entry-level wages tend to have higher education requirements. Here is the breakdown of occupations that require education beyond a high school diploma (associate’s degree, some college, or a postsecondary non-degree award) by entry-level wages:

- Can support an adult and two children: 7 occupations (54% of occupations in this category)
- Can support an adult and one child: 13 occupations (52%)
- Can support an adult: 23 occupations (30%)
- Cannot support an adult: 31 occupations (15%)

Occupations that pay more tend to have fewer openings, so reentering individuals are likely to face steeper competition to obtain these jobs. Here is the breakdown of occupations with more than 500 openings in a year by entry-level wages:

- Can support an adult and two children: 0 occupations
- Can support an adult and one child: 3 occupations (12% of occupations in this category)
- Can support an adult: 10 occupations (13%)
- Cannot support an adult: 55 occupations (26%)

Reentering individuals trying to obtain jobs that pay higher entry-level wages are more likely to need to navigate high public policy barriers. Here is the breakdown of occupations with no or low public policy barriers by entry-level wages:

- Can support an adult and two children: 2 occupations (15% of occupations in this category)
- Can support an adult and one child: 7 occupations (28%)
- Can support an adult: 48 occupations (63%)
- Cannot support an adult: 142 occupations (67%)

Reentering individuals who have not completed a high school diploma will struggle to find work that pays a sustainable entry-level wage. Of the 64 occupations in our dataset that have no formal educational requirements, 56 (88 percent) do not pay sustainable entry-level wages.

Certain occupational groups are more accessible to people reentering their communities in that they have more types of occupations with no or low public policy barriers. The most accessible occupational groups include food preparation and serving, production, and sales. Occupational groups requiring manual labor also have numerous accessible occupations. Less accessible occupational groups include business and financial; community and social service; education, training, and library; healthcare; protective services; and transportation and moving.

Reentering individuals who do not have a driver’s license have more restricted occupational choices. A driver’s license is required to qualify for 24 occupations in our dataset (7%) and likely needed to qualify for an additional 15 occupations (5%). Even more occupations may require driving to fulfill certain roles; for example, driving is not required for all sales representatives, but it may be for traveling sales representatives.
Young people who have experienced criminal legal system involvement and joined the workforce after reentry highlighted the struggle to find work, few options that provide sustainable wages that support basic needs, transportation barriers, and struggles to balance working with meeting mental health needs. The young people discussed how critical social networks are for finding work after reentry and how they would have benefitted from someone to help them navigate the basics of finding a job. Every young person worked multiple jobs after reentry but were still unable to pay all the bills or financially support their children. They talked about the time and cost of commuting to work by public transportation and rideshares.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY YOUNG PEOPLE WITH REENTRY EXPERIENCE

1. CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES OPERATED OR CONTRACTED BY DOC AND CSSD SHOULD BEGIN CAREER PLANNING AND PREPARATION BEFORE INDIVIDUALS REENTER THEIR COMMUNITIES.

Facilities operated or contracted by DOC and CSSD should implement the “Pathways to Success” program, the Pathway Home project, or another program that covers similar topics at least a year before people who have been incarcerated long-term (over a year) reenter their communities, and as soon as feasible for people who are incarcerated short-term (less than a year). If facilities contract with reentry services in the area to provide these pre-release planning services, DOC and partners can ensure that caseworkers managing pre-release and post-release services stay consistent throughout a returning resident’s case.

2. CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES OPERATED OR CONTRACTED BY DOC AND CSSD SHOULD EXPAND WORK RELEASE PROGRAMS WITHIN CORRECTIONS INSTITUTIONS AND IMPLEMENT IN-FACILITY NETWORKING EVENTS.

Extending quality work release opportunities to individuals while incarcerated can help them build their resumes, create a professional network, and secure work faster upon reentering their communities. In addition, if DOC aligns work release programs with the vocational training and educational tracts individuals participate in while incarcerated, incarcerated people may be able to turn working for a paycheck into a full-fledged, stable career. The young people additionally suggested that facilities could offer in-facility networking events so that individuals can learn about specific worksites that hire people with criminal records, share their resumes, and build a network of potential employers and people living in their communities who have successfully navigated reentry.

3. POLICYMAKERS SHOULD EXPAND BAN THE BOX POLICIES TO POSTSECONDARY PROGRAMS.

A criminal record should not be a barrier to education. However, it is important for programs to have some information on a student’s criminal record to guide students through potential policy barriers to obtaining careers after finishing their degree or certification.
4. POLICYMAKERS SHOULD LIMIT OCCUPATIONAL EXCLUSIONARY POLICIES TO THOSE WHERE EXCLUSIONS ARE NECESSARY FOR JOB DUTIES AND REQUIREMENTS.

Connecticut policymakers have made progress to remove public policy barriers to people obtaining occupational licenses, and they should continue the discourse on policies to limit occupational discrimination toward people with criminal records. The council to study collateral consequences should identify state public policy barriers to hiring people where there is no direct relationship between the criminal charge and the duties of the occupation and make recommendations to repeal statutes that create unnecessarily high barriers to work within specific professions.

5. IN COLLABORATION WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION, POLICYMAKERS SHOULD CREATE TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS TO ASSIST IN EMPLOYMENT ACTIVITIES.

We encourage policymakers to consider several options, such as making rideshare vouchers available to people for a certain amount of time after they reenter their communities or creating and providing State funding for shuttle or carpool services staffed by formerly incarcerated people.
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS BASED UPON OUR OCCUPATIONAL DATA ANALYSIS

6. POLICYMAKERS SHOULD CONTINUE RAISING CONNECTICUT’S MINIMUM WAGE TOWARD A LIVING WAGE FOR FULL-TIME WORKERS.

If Connecticut’s minimum wage followed the 60 percent SMI standard for a single adult, full-time workers would earn $39,761/year or $19.12/hour. The Economic Policy Institute Family Budget Calculator says that in Connecticut, this is still not a living wage, and that a single adult needs $50,124/year to cover their expenses. Policymakers should keep working to raise the minimum wage toward one that can truly support full-time workers. Everyone deserves to live without fear that if they see a doctor, they cannot pay rent, or if their car breaks down, they cannot afford a week of groceries. Increased pay is associated with higher reentry success for people reentering their communities after criminal legal system involvement. It’s not just unrealistic to expect that people reentering their communities can work more than 40 hours a week to make ends meet—it actually creates a public safety risk.

7. POLICYMAKERS SHOULD INCREASE THE WAGES PEOPLE EARN WHILE INCARCERATED.

We applaud members of the Connecticut General Assembly for raising H.B. 5033 in 2023 to increase compensation for incarcerated workers. We advocate for policymakers to raise this bill again in 2024 and to further increase proposed weekly wages for incarcerated people toward the wage they would earn if doing the same job outside of the carceral system.

8. IN COLLABORATION WITH DOC AND CSSD, POLICYMAKERS SHOULD ENSURE THAT ELIGIBLE INDIVIDUALS HAVE A DRIVER’S LICENSE IN HAND UPON LEAVING CARCELAR FACILITIES.

This legislative session, policymakers passed H.B. 6875: An Act Concerning the Issuance of a State Identification Card or Motor Vehicle Operator’s License to a Person Being Discharged from a Correctional Facility to ensure that people exiting carceral facilities have the identification they need for a smoother transition. We advocate for policymakers to build on this bill in future legislative sessions so that driver’s licenses are the primary form of identification provided to people when they exit a facility. Additionally, youth-serving facilities run by or contracted by the State should offer programming to help eligible young people begin the process of learning to drive and obtaining a driver’s license.

9. POLICYMAKERS SHOULD REPEAL POLICIES THAT SUSPEND OR REVOKE A DRIVER’S LICENSE FOR REASONS UNRELATED TO DRIVING INCIDENTS.

In general, Connecticut’s laws dictating when drivers lose their license reflect driving-related incidents, but there are a few remaining laws where people may have their driver’s license suspended or revoked for reasons unrelated to driving. Policymakers should repeal these laws in favor of more appropriate accountability measures that do not limit access to employment.
10. POLICYMAKERS SHOULD REINVEST SAVINGS FROM REDUCING CARCERAL FACILITIES INTO REENTRY AND PREVENTION SERVICES.

Under Governor Ned Lamont, the Department of Corrections has closed three carceral institutions. Together these institutions cost the state $26.5 million annually. We encourage legislators to create a revenue intercept to fund a reinvestment account outside of the General Fund to divert these savings toward funding substance abuse interventions, job training, crime prevention, child and youth services and activities, neighborhood development, and reentry supports. We suggest five options for policymakers to consider funding through a reinvestment account: a guaranteed basic income for returning individuals, revised gate money policies, raising reimbursement rates for community providers of reentry services, expanding the number of reentry counselors at DOC, and funding Connecticut’s reentry welcome centers, discussed next.

11. POLICYMAKERS SHOULD STABILIZE AND EXPAND FUNDING FOR CONNECTICUT’S REENTRY WELCOME CENTERS.

Connecticut expanded its reentry welcome centers during the pandemic, and they are delivering remarkable results supporting people as they reenter their communities. The estimated reoffense rates of the Bridgeport and Hartford centers are so low that Connecticut’s reentry welcome centers could become a national model. However, many are losing funds received through ARPA once 2024 ends and will need to close their doors absent a new source of funding. Providing ongoing funding to the welcome centers is a wise investment and should be a priority given savings from closed institutions.

ENDNOTES


3 Duval, Mr Romain A., Yi Ji, Longji Li, Myrto Oikonomou, Carlo Pizzinelli, Mr Ippei Shibata, Alessandra Sozzi, and Marina M. Tavares. Labor market tightness in advanced economies. International Monetary Fund, 2022.


